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## Successful project management in North Africa with intercultural competence

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### Abstract

This paper addresses intercultural competence to carry-out projects in North-Africa with success, taking the example of Algeria and Morocco. There are only few publications related to project management in North Africa and even less related to intercultural competence. The paper makes a modest attempt to help close this knowledge gap. The case study approach taken offers a trans-disciplinary approach to a vast subject and facilitates the transition from an academic /model-driven approach to the day-to-day practical challenges of the project manager's profession in a North African context. The objective of the paper is to underline the importance of intercultural competence to create a non-for profit project management organisations in Algeria and Morocco. The paper refers to existing models and examines behavioural elements of the intercultural competence by giving tangible examples collected in the field. Finally the paper comes up with recommendations to be considered before and during project start, in order to manage projects successfully.

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North African societies are characterized by a centuries-old cultural, political and social developments, customs and manners. A challenge regarding the intercultural competences needed by a person managing projects in that region, taking the example of Algeria, Africa's biggest country and the Kingdom of Morocco, a fast developing country. In this article you will learn:

- What specific cultural aspects must be taken into account by project managers operating in Morocco and Algeria
- What experience the author made in incubating and setting up project management organisations
- The success factors and recommendations arising from these experiences.

## 1. Introduction

In the analysis of success factors when people work together, one often refers to culture with its differentiations such as interculturality, multiculturalism and transculturality. For the sake of simplification, this paper will look at the subject from a perspective of intercultural competence as defined in the next paragraph as a critical success factor in project management.

Following the description of some important contextual specificities of Algeria and Morocco, the author will refer to his own empirical project management experience. In a further chapter the essential intercultural success factors of project management will be summarized in the form of recommendations.

## 2. Intercultural Competence

It is often misconceived that "intercultural competence" usually can only be acquired by somebody's own initiative. It is often connected to experiential learning. To better understand and to isolate the complexity of the term "intercultural competence", it is assumed that the concept describes the processes and dynamics of the coexistence of members from different worlds, their relationships and their interactions with one another (Hall, E.T.; Hall, M.R., 1990).

Intercultural constellations are created in projects that are known to be limited in time. This creation is done in a living world C, which neither is living world A nor the living world B. The three worlds will not be explained in an abstract manner, but using the terms of Bolten (Bolten, 2007) through real individuals acting in concert. What distinguishes life world A from life world B are the dependencies and interactions of individuals. As it is a field of action and a process, an inter-cultural culture can not be seen as a static world –i.e. a synthesis of A and B. On the contrary in intercultural exchanges a completely new quality, a synergy in the sense of classical learning effects arise, which would not have been made by themselves, neither by A nor by B (Bolten, 2007).

To define a clear framework in which intercultural competence drives a project manager to success, we will now focus in the following sections on the contextual specificities of Algeria and Morocco.

## 3. Contextual Algerian Specificities

### 3.1 From a planned economy to a gradual liberalization of the economic conditions

Algeria's economy was led by the Soviet model of planned economy after the country's independence from 1962 to 1988 (in fact this is still true in many areas today). Since the late 90s, the progressive liberalization has led to a gradual opening of the Algerian market, although to date Algeria could not join the World Trade Organization and continues the negotiations and attempts to implement the agreed reforms.

### 3.2 Numerous projects lead to a large demand for local project management skills

Between 2004 and 2014, Algeria spent over 500 billion US dollars in projects for the development of the country. These investments concern infrastructure development - such as housing and road construction, transport (metro, tram, rail network), petrochemical industry and agriculture.

By 2020, more than 200 billion US dollars are planned for further investments. This is made possible thanks to the oil and gas exports and related foreign exchange earnings in spite the recent fall of the oil price. However, it is surprising how little local Project Management Competence exists and that this discipline is not taught at colleges, universities or other educational organisations. To the day, no association in project management or any certification body in project management exists in Algeria. In a context of shrinking oil prices and in order to stick to the development commitments, professional project management is more than needed.

### *3.3 Deficit of the Algerian Educational System*

In addition to the lack of project management courses and curricula it can be noted that the Algerian education system as a whole, from schools to universities, has lost tremendously in quality over the past 30 years for various reasons. This makes it difficult to find qualified labour that is properly trained according to international standards and can that could be developed into successful project managers "on" and "off the job". The Algerian government is committed only partially to this grievance. To the day, no private university that could help to improve the quality of education is authorized by the government in charge of higher education that remains public.

## **4. Contextual Moroccan Specificities**

### *4.1 The feudal heritage of kingdoms*

Since its foundation during the idrisid dynasty in 789, Morocco is a "kingdom", an emirate than went through the Omeyyad and Fatimid period (10th and 11th century) through the Berber dynasties (Almoravid and Almohad) in the 12th century. Later the Cherifian dynasties that started in the 16th century did not change a lot in the major ruling principles of a kingdom and some feudal political structures where the power is exercised by the king and the related families/close friends to the ruling families. In the early 20th century, Morocco became a French and Spanish protectorate with close political and economical ties to France and Spain essentially for commercial purposes. Unlike Algeria that became a French "department" with all political, the legal and administrative consequences of such a framework, some political freedom was left to the Cherifi kingdom and did not put in question the social structure that existed since the 8th century. Morocco became independent in 1956 and introduced a series of liberal reforms both under the throne of Mohammed V and Hassan II.

### *4.2. Modernization of Morocco*

Since 1999 to the day of Mohammed VI, enacted successive reforms to modernize Morocco with for example the Mudawana, or family law, in early 2004, meeting some of the demands of women's rights activists fighting against the feudal traditions inherited from the past. Morocco continues to stick to the principles of a strong centralized power of a constitutional monarchy. This is critical to understand how a project management association can be created in a sustainable manner.

## **5. Culture and decision-theoretic features**

Culture is concerned with the way in which people perceive and construct the reality and processed behaviours in their society. In the context of project management various theoretical models in order to describe the reality of decision making can me mentioned.

In a male dominated society with an increasing number of women, there is generally a high power distance in the organizations both in Morocco and Algeria.

Based on the Hofstede model, decisions are generally formed on the basis of a variety of information, which is either partly or fully available. You should be able to decide between several alternatives on an intellectual and rational basis. In practice, however, the required information is incomplete in most cases. In particular, in the Algerian and Moroccan context many framework conditions are less transparent and often change. This raises the question of how decisions are made under such conditions. Culturally it means that in Algeria and Morocco commercial-politically motivated decisions, and status-recognition driven decisions are predominant over rational decision making.

Due to lack of information in the project management context, it comes often to irrational decisions based on intuition, emotions and even improvisation (without mastering the structure that lays behind improvisation and thus only partially lead to success. In such cases, decisions can be coherent and successful, based on emotions and a good instinct. Often no decisions are taken during the development phase. Goals and ways are illuminated only during the implementation, decisions are then gradually taken (see Figure 1).

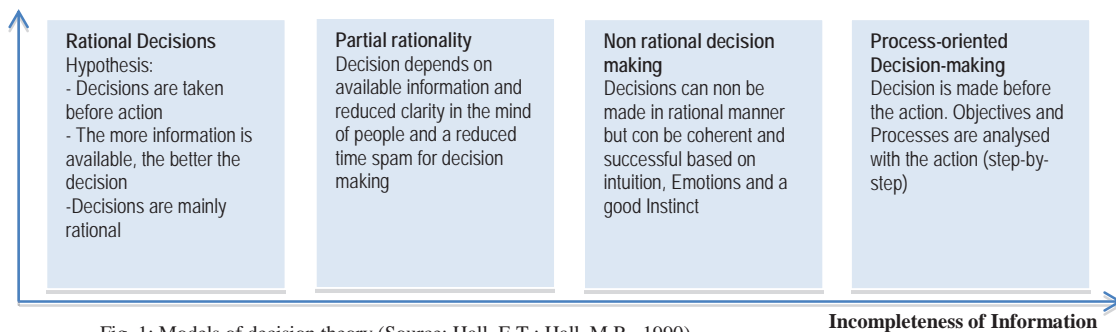


Fig. 1: Models of decision theory (Source: Hall, E.T.; Hall, M.R., 1990)

## 6. Case Studies: Incubating and Building project management organizations in Algeria and Morocco

Starting from his own experience as project manager in incubating and building project management associations in Algeria and Morocco, the author uses mentoring, organising events and workshops and project planning.

The creation of a project management Association shall be achieved by a team of pioneers, interested in project management and who are not necessarily certified project managers. The creation process can be divided in ten steps/milestones to be achieved and outlined below:

1. Identify pioneers and set-up an implementation team to be mentored
2. Elaborate a roadmap/business plan with achievable milestones
3. Formally create a national by government recognized non-for profit organization in conformity with legislation
4. Find a sponsor and financial support for the first activities and viability of the association.
5. Find members (corporate, individual, students, all economic sectors) and active voluntary members for the work
6. Structure the association with a good governance (President, Treasurer, Secretariat, etc.)
7. Set-up a certification body
8. Create a Young Crew network to assure the sustainability of the association
9. Communicate to various stakeholders through website creation, marketing and event activities, participation in IPMA events, in particular the Congress
10. Apply for IPMA as a transitional member once all application conditions are met

The international project team is dedicated to realize a number of milestones in an annual and strategic plan.

The creation process of a PM-structure takes place gradually, since the commitment and motivation of the teams in Algeria and Morocco differ from one another and are critical for the success of PM association creation. Here comes the cultural element in the mentoring and incubation process to get commitment from the stakeholders.

The way one explains the word “commitment” bearing in mind the different interpretations of the term “commitment” is critical. Particularly when trying to align mutual expectations and get the right level of commitment from the core-team of pioneers during the pre-project phase.

For this reason intercultural competence will help to get a converging view between team members on project processes and project results.

Using the model of cultural intelligence (Thomas, D.C., 2006) as the intersection of knowledge, behaviour and mindfulness, some examples can be given from experience in the field:

- First point, knowledge: for instance in the area of communication and more precisely the language used. Although French is the first language of Algeria and Morocco in the field of science, Algerian and Moroccan Arabic (Arabic dialect that includes many transformed French words), French, Arabic and Kabyle (an ancient Berber language) are commonly used in the course of the project. Mastering one or two of these languages helps the project manager to win the trust of the Algerian and Moroccan project partner. English is also increasingly used in North Africa although spoken at a modest level. Therefore mostly French and Arabic are used during conferences and events.
- Second point, Mindfulness, cultural “metacognition” (thinking about thinking): Reflection one’s own role and the role of the other, as well as empathy are essential in interpersonal relations. An example using mindfulness helped to understand why during a recent conference in Casablanca, the Moroccan host did not want to conclude the conference at the end of the day. He preferred to leave this opportunity to a foreigner. This can be explained by the adoption of a low profile, Moroccan politeness, a great sense of hospitality and as a token of thanks to the foreigner’s participation at the conference.
- Third point, Behaviour, such as “management style”: The so-called “Western” and often in business schools taught management style is not particularly helpful in an North-African context. However, a relationship-oriented and partially authoritarian management style characterizes many typical North-African leadership structures.

Intercultural competence can’t be equated with a technique (D’Irisbane, P. 2008). It is not just about a bunch of instruments that are shown during short trainings and that might be efficiently used in various situations. Intercultural competence is about attitudes that have grown from a particular background of values. In this sense, the acquisition of intercultural skills is a lifelong process which does not end with a single training course, but must be, geared to the needs resulting from the social reality and the changing professional situations again and again.

The essential intercultural success factors derived from the case study « Creation of project management organisations in Algeria and Morocco » are summarized in the following section.

## **7. Significant cross-cultural success factors**

### *7.1 What can be retained from the projects run in North Africa*

Morocco and Algeria’s populations composed of Berber tribes, the Turkish supremacy during the Othman Empire, 132-year-long colonization by France and the subsequent bloody seven-year war of independence – and a French protectorate in Morocco, the very different but both authoritarian political regimes established after the independence of both countries, all this has left deep traces in Algeria and Morocco. Critical remarks on the country should either be completely avoided or formulated positively - not only on political topics.

A distinctive trait that stands out in cooperation with the project partners, is pride. In the case of Algeria, it can partly be explained by the consequences of the war of independence against the “Grand Nation” France (1954-

1962) in the case of Algeria in which over 800.000 Algerians died (Chouhada=Martyrs of the revolution). In the case of Morocco, it can be partly be explained by the fact that citizens of a Kingdom of the Alouite dynasty which are descendants from Muhammad al-Nafs asl Zakiya, descendant from Abdallah El Kamil, etc.,... descendent from Fatima Zahra, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. In this context, one should always consider project partners as equals and be aware of their pride. Derogatory remarks about local customs or the business practices are to be avoided. Questions about women can be considered as a "killer" behaviour, as well as the consumption of alcohol and pork. This should be taken into account by the selected project manager.

Further more, self-assured style of leadership combined with self-confident "understatement" and emphasized modesty help project managers to gain authority in a local hierarchy. This authority and recognition is emphasized through technical competence, which are helpful for a constructive cooperation.

A special intercultural feature is also the subject of "efficiency" and the concept of time associated with it. "Haste comes from the devil, rest comes from God" is an Arabic proverb which should be respected. As an example, the start of a conference in Algiers can easily be delayed by one hour, due to the different notion of time, a real challenge in many countries, also in North Africa.

### *7.2 Mentoring: regular systematic tracking of agreed milestones*

A strong mentoring in dealing with Algerian project partners (it is less the case in Morocco) is required because independent and accurate work - especially among the younger generation (70 per cent of the population is under 35 years old) – is often non-existent. In fact (Role Models) and an increasing social injustice often cause low levels of education, coupled with a poor role model of many Algerian leaders in performance principle. As a result, many young people consider their future without perspective and thus go demotivated to work. Despite a prevailing "Baraka setting" (In-challah, deo volente mind set) making sure that the counter-parts shape their future requires a lot of energy, patience and endurance.

Working skills such as social skills, analytical skills and work ethics are often missing, more in Algeria than in Morocco where the level of education is generally higher than in Algeria.

### *7.3 Contextualization of the project results / project schedule*

A project's success or - failure is often due to the so-called "cross-cultural perception" of success. What is success? In other words, it's about how project success in the world between A and B (Rectarius, M., 2013) is perceived.

The divergent perspectives of project management and intercultural interpretations of project advancement must be taken into account (Rectarius, M., 2013). This allows a rationalization of the interpretation of the project progress and thus an approximation of the interpretations of both project partners. In this project, although both project partners speak French, they have a different cultural interpretation in terms of the realized project milestones, although these milestones were defined jointly before the launch of the projects.

#### **Example 1: Agreement on the achievement of milestones**

The author, in his capacity as a project manager in a friendly tone explains that a milestone has not been reached objectively as initially agree. The response from the project partner is often: "We're not in Europe, dear friend", reminding us to take into account the context. Helpful in such a situation would be to agree in the pre-project phase project to achieve 100 and expect 50% achievement.

So success will mean when 50% of the project is achieved. Thus, each project partner saves his face, conflicts are avoided to achieve the next 50 per cent of planned milestones. Expectation then on both sides will gradually increase later in the same line.

#### **Example 2: Strengthen motivation**

A milestone could not be reached on the grounds that the internet connection was unstable over two months. If one explains his project partner that this is happening in other parts of the world and the milestones are reached (such as the creation of an association in a relatively poor country like Nepal), you can grab the person by her pride, so she makes further efforts to reach the next milestone.

The term "project milestone not achieved / late" represents a cultural comparison and based on our own cultural values. In a Western type of mind set, this attitude (milestone not achieved) will quickly be considered as non-performance or even failure. Consequently, it is in the interest of all stakeholders to find a balance between objectively project management related interpretation on one side and cross-cultural interpretations of project progress/success on the other side.

#### *7.4 Verbal communication as intercultural skills: interpersonal and oral versus rational and writing*

An important part of mentoring is a regular communication. In our case study it should be noted that the oral communication (telephone / Skype / face-to-face) is much more effective than written communication as often partners do not respond to emails. This is a strong cultural fact which is deeply rooted in the day-to-day behaviour, also among younger people. Oral communication is often more effective as it brings over emotions that in turn emphasise the importance of the message sent to the recipient. Further more, it is particularly appreciated that discussions take place on topics, that apparently have no direct link with the project. With the ability to build a verbal relationship the project manager brings considerable advantages in dealing with his project team and project stakeholders in order to build trust and respect.

#### *7.5 Improvisation*

As derived from the model of decision theory, particularly in the Algerian context, there is little information available to make decisions. Against this background, the intercultural competence is crucial to make decisions at the same time with the target and process development. This is usually preceded by a good ability to improvise as do musicians who observe their teammates, their audience and the general atmosphere. From this atmosphere, musicians are inspired to play the correct notes, the adequate melody and rhythm so that a groovy music is created.

Along these lines, intercultural competence can stimulate "groovy" project management where most project stakeholders will be satisfied and see the project as being successful.

### **8. Summary/conclusion**

Intercultural competence in project management in North Africa is critical to understand the cultural and decision-making theoretical background that a project manager must consider.

In the case study described, we addressed the creation of a project management association.

The specificities of the Algerian and Moroccan context must be known by the project manager before starting the project and in order to be aware of the critical intercultural success factors: selection of the adequate project staff, an adequate mentoring, the contextualisation of project results and project success, the predominance of verbal over written communication and improvisation abilities.

As Morocco and Algeria are increasingly opening up their economies and competing with international quality standards in many sectors to become emerging countries by 2030, intercultural competence will become increasingly a critical success factor for project managers working in North Africa.

However, until then the two countries could become short of time, which is more the case for Algeria than Morocco, to address their respective societal challenges.

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